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NORTH CHICAGO -- The Navy quietly reopened Gate 4 on Monday and traffic is once again flowing into and out of Great Lakes across a reconstructed intersection at Sheridan Road and Martin Luther King Drive.

"It's about time," said a sailor, who identified himself as a teacher in "A School" -- one of the first drivers to exit the gate since it was closed in 1990.

Lakendrick Hamilton of Zion, who works as a janitor on the base, said Gate 4 makes it easier to leave for lunch.

"It looks pretty good," he said, as he surveyed the new roadwork after driving west through the gate.

The Illinois Department of Transportation and Illinois Commerce Commission agreed that the new design of the intersection and railroad crossing -- gone is the hill and the curve that obstructed drivers' views of oncoming traffic -- and the new traffic signals looked good.

"The lights are on to stay," said Kristen Swahlstedt, IDOT traffic signal engineer.

Formerly known as the 22nd Street gate, the entry was first partially closed by Great Lakes commanders in November 1989 after three sailors were killed in two months while trying to cross the railroad tracks directly to the west. The Navy curtailed the gate's hours to between 5 a.m. and 6 p.m. and by the following year, closed it completely after the south end of the Amstutz Expressway was built.

The closure caused a dramatic drop in business along the city's downtown commercial area, once referred to as "The Strip," as both sailors and civilians were directed away from the area.

The city, along with the Navy, IDOT and the Union Pacific Railroad, began reconstruction of the crossing and intersection in June 2006. But as the \$6 million project neared completion, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, had to intervene to get the Navy to agree to unlock the gate.

However, the Navy's resistance is still in evidence as Gate 4 will be closed from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. weekdays and will also be shuttered weekends and holidays.

North Chicago Mayor Leon Rockingham said he will continue to press for the gate to stay open.

"I'd like to continue to work with the Navy to build a rapport so the gate can stay open 24 hours a day, seven days a week," he said.

Jim Triplett, safety officer for the base, said he was pleased with the engineering on the project. He stressed that the gate is not "a student gate."

"This is the west entrance to the base, to be used by everyone -- civilians, sailors, employees," he said.

Great Lakes' Public Affairs did not return a call inquiring about the reason for the gate's limited access.

A permanently opened gate may be crucial for the success of the planned Sheridan Crossing, a 40-acre retail development that will replace the seedy strip, much of which has already been torn down, with a hotel/conference center, restaurant and assorted shops.

"Any potential developer knows how many people come out of this gate," said Sixth Ward Ald. Bob Runnels, a retired Navy journalist who was once stationed at Great Lakes. "That's business. They're going to look at our 40 acres and say, 'Maybe I'll build something there.'"

Runnels was the first driver to pull over the tracks and through the gate at 11:53 a.m. Monday. Third Ward Ald. Valerie DeVost, the first pedestrian to cross, said the city will work to keep the area well patrolled and cited a new police substation set to open a few blocks north at Sheridan and 18th Street. She said she is looking to Kirk to "support us 100 percent."

"I would like to see it (Gate 4) permanently open," DeVost said. "We will continue to do whatever we can to keep this area nice, quiet and clean."

A warning device is expected to alert drivers crossing the tracks that the gate is closed. Drivers on Sheridan Road west of the tracks will also have to learn that they cannot turn east to enter the gate, but will have to access entry to the base further north or south.

City Engineer Bruce Burris said IDOT nixed turns east across the tracks during the initial traffic study for the project.

"The study showed the intersection would be too congested to allow turn movements," Burris said.